

Book review

The Placemaker's Guide to Building Community

N. Hamdi. Earthscan, London and Washington, 2010, ISBN 978 1 84407 803 5, £19.99, 252 pp.

The Placemaker's Guide to Building Community is based on a multiplicity of stories arising from the author's experience in developing places where people live. Being based on narrative, richly amplified by cameo stories from a number of other contributors, it is an engaging read. The approach is refreshing for following the line of inductive reasoning based on empirical experience, rather than deductive logic based on carefully selected and presented sources. However, and despite the word 'guideline' being used in the title, the book never quite reads as a guide: the reader learns most through the stories.

Hamdi copiously provides quotations from other writers in the field and we learn a lot from these people, and from Hamdi's own experience. For example, that 'dwelling is a process, not a thing to be mass produced', that 'you cannot make dwelling for people you do not know', that you should 'build support structures within which people can build their own' and that the process needs to 'arrive at simplicity'. These aphorisms arise from and are supported by the stories which are told.

The book's clear identification of the basic requirement to work with existing communities that are being assisted is consistently made; and the point is made that expectations are therefore raised and should not be dashed by a lack of due process at any stage from inception to completion. He also challenges the start and end points suggesting, for example, that you can only arrive at policy through projects, and that an informal approach starts with building, and leads into infrastructure to support the building, with the legal framework following all of that.

He places emphasis on the processes of listening and questioning, pointing out the need to be very open and perhaps vague in the questioning which then allows the enquirer to see what emerges as a result, and that result may be entirely different than is expected. In one memorable example, he tells a story against himself about a closed ended proposition to reduce flood risk that is being promoted as the most important development objective. This was challenged by a woman slum-dweller who eloquently argued that the maximum reduction in risk could ultimately be obtained through education in the first, and most important, instance.

The book is offered in four parts, the first giving accounts of good, bad and ugly experiences of the process, and the second offering of stories to illustrate the most appropriate methodologies. The third and fourth parts offer a more systematic description of the logic behind the approaches and the ways of becoming educated in these processes. Again, an approach characteristically upended in comparison with the ordering of material usually provided is evident here: one might have expected guidelines to provide an initial codification followed by perhaps appendices of case study examples.

Overall, does the book work? This must be unequivocally answered in the affirmative, not least because the whole manner of the book's structure is oriented exactly in the same direction as the processes that it is suggesting are adopted: narrative based and sequenced around a process of careful listening to the voice of experience. While the book offers excellent guidance to individuals who are practitioners, there is, however, little in the way by which institutions offering development solutions can and should organise themselves.

John Parkin